

---

This is the **published version** of the bachelor thesis:

Ballart Lladós, Clara; Pujolràs Noguer, Esther, dir. A Nauseating Fall. Understatement and Realisation in Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions. 2017. 32 pag. (801 Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

---

This version is available at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/180002>

under the terms of the  license

**A Nauseating Fall: Understatement and Realisation**  
**in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions***

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

Supervisor: Dr Esther Pujolràs

Clara Ballart

June 2017

## Acknowledgements

I need to thank my supervisor, Dr. Esther Pujolràs, not only for her time, support, corrections and confidence, but for opening my eyes. It is not about Africa; it is about ourselves, it is about being women, it is about being alive. If it were not for her enthusiasm, I would not have learned so much. I thank as well my second examiner, Dr. Felicity Hand to whom I similarly owe another view of Africa.

I am also grateful to my father and his priceless impartial comments about my work: my discoveries and my curiosity have become *our* discoveries; to my mother for always having Said's *Orientalism* at hand way before I even considered the world to be divided in halves; to my friend Josep for our endless train journeys to that other half.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o said something in his recent visit to Barcelona that struck me deeply: we can all see the stars from our country and from our mother tongue. We can all see the world from our small rooftops, from where we stand. This is where I stand. I could not be more grateful for it.

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract	4
Introduction: Surviving through Memory, and Classics	5
1. Discussing Anger: Fanon's Nausea and Dangarembga's Tight Smile	8
2. The Razor-Sharp Edges of Mimicry: The Wedding.	17
Conclusion: Have a Good Time, You African.	27
Bibliography	31

## Abstract

The strikingly simple style of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* —the narration of an apparently innocent child, Tambudzai— cuts deep into the reader, making the novel an impressively powerful critique of the colonial machinery. The aim of this paper is to show to what extent the unreliable narrator, with her understatements, is responsible for the numerous connections with the most well-known postcolonial theories. The many readings Dangarembga's work has received, from a myriad of perspectives (feminism, postcolonialism, the *bildungsroman*), are rooted in the apparent ambiguity of the narrator's words. The first part of this paper is concerned with describing the quality of this narration: just as Fanon's prophetic voice, Dangarembga's revolts the reader so as to make her fall into realisation. The second part of this paper deals again with this sudden awareness of reality, not the reader's but the characters' when having to experience what Bhabha defined as mimicry; the wedding between Tambu's parents is a turning point in her life because of her refusal to comply with the discourse of power and thus speak of her «newly acquired identity» (Dangarembga, 169). Taking into account the oppression to which the characters are subjected and their manifold kinds of resignation, *Nervous Conditions* fights back with conscience. Understatement and subsequent realisation are the best device to make us, readers, aware of the shackles of the Empire and, at the same time, conscious of the menace that this ironic contempt implies. Dangarembga's tight smile in the face of power through the voice of a conscious child is, decidedly, a cry of hope.

Key words: Fanon, mimicry, postcolonial, understatement, unreliable narrator

## Introduction: Surviving through Memory, and the Classics

«But you didn't block off, you remembered it all».  
«But perhaps we had different ways of *surviving*».  
«That's a strong word», he said, his eyes hard.  
«It's the word I use».

Lessing, *African Laughter*<sup>1</sup>

As readers, one of the most remarkable feelings ever to experience is that of having between our hands, already finished, a novel that you finally understand why it is called a classic. Regardless of the many opinions on the matter, we would agree on that feeling at least, of transcendence, of grandeur; we nod our heads in acknowledgment, overwhelmed. For Kermode, though,

the only works we value enough to call classic are those which, and they demonstrate by surviving, are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities.

(Kermode as cited in Borg Barthet, 2009: 181).

This is exactly the case of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: both the feeling of being overwhelmed and the complexity that Kermode points out. This essay revolves around this necessary ambiguity that makes of the novel, as Borg Barthet states (2009), a classic that contends with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for the title of the foremost African classic. Since its publication in

---

<sup>1</sup> (Lessing, 1993: 62)

1988 it has been greatly acclaimed by writers such as Alice Walker and Doris Lessing, the latter highlighting its quality of «classic» (Dangarembga, 1998: i).

As befits a classic, the numerous accounts and readings of the novel have focussed on many different topics: feminism (Vizzard (1992), Moyana (1994), Sugnet (1997); all of them mentioned in this essay), postcolonialism (Kim, 2013), the notion of the *bildungsroman* (Hay, 2013) and post-modernism (Gray, 1997), and yet none of them are able to give closure to the book, to totally respond to the unanswered question of Tambudzai's coming-of-age story: is she ever able to break free from the colonial system that subjects her? As Borg Barthet (2009) claims, in line with Ker-mode's remark, this incapacity to frame the work within a specific label is what makes it a classic.

The number of overlapping topics that the novel draws attention to is certainly startling. From the topics that might be present in what we usually call a «postcolonial work» after Tyson's classification Dangarembga, covers more than the usual. While a postcolonial work understood in Tyson's view is bound to focus on one or two topics, *Nervous Conditions* is far more comprehensive (in *Critical Theory Today*, 2006, as quoted in Baharvand, P. A. and Zarrinjooee, B., 2012).<sup>2</sup>

However, the aim of this paper is to claim how the style in which the novel is written, through the voice of an unreliable narrator, is what gives Dangarembga the power to tackle the most relevant topics in postcolonial thought. Her use of understatement, and, therefore, silence (Ker-mode's «complex and indeterminate»), allows her to put the reader in the necessary «nervous condition» to understand the depth and perversity of the colonial system. The first chapter of this essay is concerned with the quality of this unreliable narrator in Dangarembga, which is not innocent;

---

<sup>2</sup> Tyson (in *Critical Theory Today*, 2006, as quoted in Baharvand, P. A. and Zarrinjooee, B., 2012) mentions eight items: (1) the initial encounter with the colonisers and the disruption of their known reality; (2) wilderness and the Europeans' journey through it; (3) «othering» or colonial oppression; (4) mimicry; (5) exile (being an outsider in one's own land); (6) post-independence disillusionment; (7) the struggle for identity, collective and individual: hybridity; (8) the need to self-define themselves with the recognition of a post-colonial past. In Dangarembga we might discuss the appearance of oppression, mimicry, exile (made extremely clear by the character of Nyasha), hybridity (in the character of Tambu), and the revision of a past outside the official version that the Whites have given.

conversely, Tambudzai is implicitly angry. The link between madness (a «nervous condition») and anger with Fanon is thus explained.

It is through this analogy of the «fall into realisation» that the second chapter deals with mimicry. Analogous to the reader's sudden awareness of reality, the characters also experience a detachment from the discourse of power and «fall into realisation»: they grasp the actual reality that erases their identity and is oppressive enough to make them obey. Bhabha's theory on mimicry (1994) is, in my opinion, introduced through a clever use of language and extreme events such as the wedding<sup>3</sup>.

In relation to the persisting question on whether the novel presents a free, or rather, a subjected protagonist in the very end, my essay concludes by stressing how *hopefully* resignation is treated. We are presented with many victims, the narrator being one of them, but the social function of the style («writing back», as one would say after the homonymous book by Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin; *The Empire Writes Back*, 1989) by using elegant ironies, successfully manages not to conclude her story in a sorrowful note.

Lessing defines as «survival» her remembrance of her life in colonial Rhodesia in *African Laughter* (1993), and it is also an acute act of memory and conscience, as well, what defines Tambudzai's poignant story. My paper, therefore, attempts to underline the consciousness behind the innocent-looking narrator, a consciousness that reveals her Fanonian rage and nausea.

---

<sup>3</sup> This is similar to Sally McWilliam's perception of mimicry being used as a narrative device (as quoted by Vizzard, 1992).



## 1. Discussing Anger: Fanon's Nausea and Dangarembga's Tight Smile

«Look, a Negro!» It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

«Look, a Negro!» It was true. It amused me.

«Look, a Negro!» The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

«Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!». Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible... Nausea... (Fanon, 1986: 112)

Fanon's episode of the child in the train as the turning point in his awareness of otherness is extremely relevant when considering the choice of narrator in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The connection is not made, though, by the plain fact that Dangarembga's teenager, Tambudzai, and Fanon's outspoken boy share a presumably unprejudiced view of the world which later turns out to be heavily prejudiced. Youth, therefore, is not the connection. Instead, the link between the two is more subtle: the choice of an unreliable narrator.

It is certainly risky and even offensive to call Fanon's voice an unreliable one, for his strength and anger are as powerful as they are irresistible, and we readers cannot but be captivated by it. In addition, his is not a work of fiction, even though his essays can be understood poetically: «I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. ... They would see, then! I

had warned them, anyway.» (Fanon, 1986: 115) Fanon's discourse can be read as a retaliation, and this couple of sentences, still rooted in the disgust he felt under the boisterous judgement of the child in the train, are but a simple proof of his power as a narrator and as a poet (It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss the genres nor the strategies of narration. The assumptions being made ought to be taken as a useful but broad analysis of the texts.) Going back to anger, it is his choice of language, which I have already defined as poetical, what makes him sound angry, and close to the reader. The reason for it is the personal nature of his comments, the speech-like quality of them, its extreme simplicity. It is because of these reasons that the reader detects anger, and *feels* the voice. His clearly idiosyncratic style might be a result of him not being a scholar and thus not writing for an academic audience. Instead, his voice becomes, at times, almost prophetic and allegorical. This adjective, *prophetic*, it is not only valid to describe passages like the following one, but it also makes reference to the key role his texts under colonial rule would have afterwards, for the post-colonial critics. Because of his relevance and the context in which he wrote (Algeria's war for independence that became *the* war for independence of each and every oppressed man), his voice *scarred* the colonial tissue so that even nowadays we can trace his anger in many fields. Thus, we could refer to Fanon the prophet, in quality and also in the truth of personal experience that we can feel in his words.

All round me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps at my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me... (Fanon: 114)

It must be agreed that his words, his constant resort to repetition, his short sentences, questions, outbursts; his language, in short, makes him a Voice («And now how my voice vibrates!» Fanon: 123), a sage, an ancestral poet, a seducer of the reader<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> It might be interesting to recall at this point another text containing a Voice in capital letters, based, as well, on a personal liminal experience in Africa. Conrad's Marlow keeps insisting on the magnetic and ancestral quality of Kurtz's voice. For the student who started her journey into the *Heart of Darkness* of postcolonialism from Conrad's eyes, the jump from the sick, absurd West-incriminating yet West-indulgent

This seduction is also the essence of what the unreliable narrator aims to do. With a strategy of its own, the voice leads the reader exactly where it wants, and then lets us fall into realisation. In David Lodge's words,

The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter.  
(Lodge, 1992: 155)

Let us focus, firstly, on this «gap between appearance and reality» in Dangarembga's text and the «fall» of the reader. Anger as defined by Fanon's extreme outbursts of hatred («What! When it was I who had every reason to hate, to despise, I was rejected?» (Fanon, 1986: 115)) cannot be found in Tambudzai's narration of her life as a child. Instead, we read a sweet, child-like, innocent and colourful depiction of a certain reality. Nothing is highlighted —this is the novel's «interesting way» of making us fall. Injustice is tackled from the perspective of the kid who is made to stay home the day it rains; there is no distinction or degree between offenses. Conversely, Tambu's reaction *in her words* (attention to the «gap between appearance and reality» in the form of a myriad of understatements) is fairly consistent: she looks as angry when being rejected by her cousin Nyasha immediately after her return from England as when Babamukuru calls her daughter Nyasha a whore (Dangarembga: 114). In the same line, Tambu's indifference or surprise when trying to account for the fact that she no longer dances because of people's reactions to her is outrageously simple (thus, unbelievable).

---

voice of Kurtz to Fanon's raw reality is extremely remarkable. («Kurtz discoursed. A voice! A voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart.» Conrad, 1996: 85). While Kurtz's speech is futile yet prophetic, Fanon's words are painful *therefore* prophetic. This is to say that the poetic power of a discourse cannot be looked down on at any rate, for it is probably the touch of literature that is able to convey a message.

As I had grown older and the music had begun to speak to me more clearly, my movements had grown stronger, more rhythmic and luxuriant; but people had not found it amusing anymore, so that in the end I realised that there were bad implications in the way I enjoyed the rhythm. (Dangarembga: 42)

The choice of words is masterly made. In fact, the words are so revealing («luxuriant» moves, «enjoy» the rhythm) that her innocence is immediately questioned: can she actually be saying that she does not know? The answer from the reader comes in the form of reading on and on, to discover the real «gap between appearance» (a touching innocence) and «reality» (the assumptions that any reader is constantly making). It is precisely because of the constant understatement in Dangarembga's story that this «fall» into realisation is as violent as Fanon's.

Let us examine again the episode of the child in the train, and Fanon's reaction. His response to the insult can be seen in four ways. Firstly, we know that he smiled tightly. Secondly, «it amused me» (Fanon: 111). Thirdly, «I made no secret of my amusement» (Fanon: 111). And finally «Laughter had become impossible... nausea» (Fanon: 111). It is helpful to consider this simple story as the stages of realisation of the colonial machinery. We, as readers, (or as colonial subjects in some way or another), also walk down the road of awareness in these four stages (Fanon's «I moved toward the other...»: 112). As we have seen in Lodge's appreciation of the unreliable narrator, the role of the reader is key in understanding the text. This moving «toward the other» can be understood in our case as the fall into realisation once the «gap between appearance and reality» in purely literary terms has been detected, and also the gradual recognition of the crookedness of a system that disguises under the polish of centuries of «nauseating» manipulation.

Our purpose, however, is to link Fanon's extreme nausea to Tambudzai's apparent innocence. Dangarembga's child is not (yet) down the path of realisation: Tambu is still smiling tightly at injustice, maybe still being «amused» (the same sort of amusement that, as she tells us, people stopped feeling when watching her dance); at some point, though, the language in the most under-

stated way, betrays the polished smile of the formally innocent style (this is pointed out by Borg (2009) in a delicious analogy: «carefully preserved pockets of silence», 181) The reader is not pushed down the abyss of awareness as in Fanon, but gently walked to the edge in a clever, perverse way. We shall not stop insisting on the relevance of the style: the choice of words is crucial for the reader to perceive how something is *wrong*, essentially perverse. The following remark is made by the narrator after realising that she does not know what a traffic light is:

«You will learn all about them in Standard One, when you read about Ben and Betty in Town and country.» It became evident to me that I had no alternative but to sell my maize and go back to school. (Dangarembga: 27)

Just as the adjectives related to her dancing abilities were slightly suspicious, the straightforwardness of the sentence «it became evident to me that I had no alternative» is far too categorical, specially when referring to the existence of *traffic lights* which are nowhere to be found in Tambudzai's community. Her keenness or naïveté betrays her. We feel there has to be something else behind her words, what Lodge defines as a «growing perception of its inadequacy for what it describes» (Lodge: 155). At some points her disguise is easier to detect:

From my grandmother's history lessons, I knew that my father and brother suffered painfully under the evil wizard's spell. (Dangarembga: 50)

This uncalled for judgement made at the end of her explanation on how her grandmother considers the Whites as «wizards» is impressive. The narrator who seemed to be describing, defining, makes an overwhelming statement that clearly deviates from the general easy-going tone. The reader halts and frowns: «suffered painfully». The gap and the fall are here.

To finish with this point, and going back to Lodge's theory, it is interesting how he asserts that this slight or remarkable distortion of reality on the part of the narrator «need not be a conscious, or mischievous, intention on their part» (Lodge: 155). This brings us to the interesting topic of the *function* a text might have. Avoiding endless debates on the nature of art, and just focussing

on the use of literary devices such as the unreliable narrator, it might be the best place to recall Linda Hutcheon's words as quoted in Mishra and Hodge's «What is Post (-) Colonialism?».

The current post-structuralist/postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject have to be put on hold in feminism and post-colonial discourses, for both must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity: those radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses. (Hutcheon, cited in Hodge, B. and Mishra V., 1991: 281)

Hutcheon is referring not explicitly to stylistic postmodern tropes, but, in general, to any feature that we may consider postmodern, such as the questioning of the meta-narrative. Postcolonialist and feminist texts, she defends, do not use these tropes as a *luxury*, but rather as a *need* to «affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity». The function of these tropes in these texts is not, therefore, recreative; or, going back to Lodge's remark, the use of certain strategies is, clearly, *conscious* and *mischievous* —they are serving a purpose: the reassertion of a scarred identity and the liberation from a «crushing objecthood» (Fanon: 109). In my opinion, Dangarembga's choice of narrator is intrinsically related to a will on her part to be politic, to highlight in the most powerful way of all the most hidden and the most glaring aspects of the colonialist tyranny. Hers is a text that aims at the affirmation of two crushed identities: that of a colonial subject and that of a woman, thus being an example of both contexts in which Hutcheon pointed to the need for defiant strategies in writing. Answering then Lodge's comment («This need not be a conscious...», Lodge: 155), Dangarembga's choice is, indeed, conscious. And as a response to Lodge's «If he had been reliable, the effect would, of course, have been incredibly boring» (Lodge: 157) we can say that because of the looked-for political connotations of Dangarembga's discourse, we are far away from the spheres of boredom and fun; it is much more. There is no fancy in her game, there is palpitating life, and sorrow. The following passage, sharp and poignant, will completely justify my claim when saying that there is a conscious voice, never losing track of her agenda:

I did not like the way they looked [the Whites], with their skin hanging in papery folds from their bones, malignant-looking brown spots on their hands, a musty, dusty, sweetish odour clinging around the woman like a haze. Making sure not to wrinkle my nose, because these were the people who have the money ..., I smiled more broadly, showing all my teeth, and said «Nice maize, good maize». (Dangarembga: 27)

At this point, I can fairly claim that Fanon's anger also runs through Dangarembga's words (what Sue J. Kim (2013) calls the «large anger» in *Nervous Conditions*: 101). Fanon brings postcolonial discourse to the very extreme through affirmations such as «There is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white» (Fanon: 12), making the reader jump from the first stage of a tight, uncomfortable smile to the irrational angst of the last stage: awareness and need of revenge. Staying in an ambiguous, ironic second or third stage, Dangarembga does also reproduce in the reader's head the whole of the colonial discourse. She does that through silence and dramatic irony: for we can predict Tambu's failure to change her reality and Nyasha's doom, because we *know* about the adult world of a settler colony—in fact, we are *made to know* through silence. We assume. In assuming, Dangarembga's anger cuts deeper than Fanon's: we, readers, because we know better than Tambu, because we recognise her as an innocent narrator, because we are reading a story from the eyes of an unreliable narrator, are made accomplices of the colonial discourse. We reproduce it, we predict, we articulate and therefore we *explain* injustice. It is in this fashion that Dangarembga can go further than Fanon, and measure from the safe zone of the «tight smile» of the train how much pressure we can handle from the colonial discourse; how much we are ready to swallow as colonial subjects, or, even further, as women. She exposes the crookedness of the system (both colonial power and patriarchy) in her language and style, oscillating from a childlike tone to a sarcastic one, as in:

The holy whites lighten our darkness... I often ask myself why they come... which brings us back to matters of brotherly love, contribution and lighting of diverse darknesses. (Dangarembga: 103)

Fanon palpitates in the nonchalant «lightning of diverse darknesses», and it is truly remarkable. The fact that we can easily read on without noticing the hostility Tambu distillates in such powerful words (far off from the prophetic voice of revenge), is what gives greatness to this and these *Nervous Conditions*. The more we read, the more we feel its nervousness, its anger, its fire. Fanon might shout «An outrage!» (Fanon: 122), and Dangarembga will write, quietly, softly:

Maybe that was why his nerves were so sharply on edge that afternoon, making it a bad day for both the man and his daughter. (Dangarembga: 193)

In this manner, it is assumed that the daughter is simply subjected, tied, to the flimsy hysteria of a father. Everything is plainly explained through a double-edged attenuation («maybe»). It is worth considering at this point as well Tambu's words when unable to go to school because of her brother.

Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case; when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. ... Thinking about it, feeling the injustice about it, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother, my father, my mother—in fact everybody. (Dangarembga: 12)

These are the first instances of Tambu's narration. And yet we see what will be her way of dealing with the story: cleverly hinting at injustice through the plainness of the child. It is relevant to note the repetition of «in reality»—the reader is asked to notice how «in reality» things are absolutely absurd. Furthermore, we should turn our attention as well to the easy-goingness of saying that she dislikes everyone. When reading it for the first time we might overlook the actual power of it: Tambu *is not happy*, ever, and it is there, in plain English; she is telling us, repeatedly, about her nausea.

Fanon's «I shouted my laughter to the stars» (Fanon: 131), a sardonic, revengeful laughter, is encapsulated in Dangarembga's novel in the way we have mentioned, the teenage point of view, but also in a subtle, almost imperceptible way when describing situations; an almost unnoticeable extra-touch of irony. A good example of this is provided by Babamukuru's whitewashing and his



wish to become a White. Tambu is talking to him during a car journey, and she cleverly mixes the landscape with her considerations on her uncle and his obvious will to act as a White: «What had he become? A deep valley cracked open.» (Dangarembga: 64) Obviously, the valley is physical, and they can see it from the car. It is worth mentioning, though, the juxtaposition of concepts. The point is not being pushed forward for us to understand at once that the narrator wants us to link the soul of the black man to a valley that «cracked open», but its proximity makes us presume this connection, or sense it; doubling its effect on us because of the «fall» into realisation that we are constantly asked to do. It is the same case when describing the laundry Tambu and Nyasha are to do: «While we were at it [doing the laundry], still battling with the whites, which consisted chiefly of my uncle's shirts and underwear and so had to be done thoroughly...» (Dangarembga: 170). The connotations and meanings that arise cannot be a matter of coincidence; firstly the uncle is Babamukuru, the «not quite/not White» (Bhabha, 1994: 92); and secondly the fighters against the whites are evidently the two girls who are made to do the laundry and «battle» with black filth that has to be washed out. There is a constant play, then, with the assumptions of patriarchy, race, reality. This will not be further analysed, but it would certainly deserve a keen observation.

The further and yet most obvious connection that we may draw, however, between Fanon and Dangarembga, is the clear reference to the introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, «the condition of a native is a nervous condition» (Dangarembga: i) at the very beginning of the book. Even though the words are not from Fanon, but from Sartre, they summarise the contents of the study. Sugnet asserts that reading this sentence, and deciding with it the title of her novel «must have been an immediate fit, a "Eureka"!» (Sugnet, 1997: 35). It is even more undeniable that Dangarembga writes always under the darkest shadow of Fanonian neurosis, expanding it, making us aware of the extent to which he most accurately defined this condition.

## 2. The Razor-Sharp Edges of Mimicry: The Wedding.

He was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself.  
(Ngugi, 1994: 390)

The *founding objects* of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental *objets trouvés* of the colonial discourse —the part-objects of presence. (Bhabha, 1994: 92).

It has already been claimed that the style in which *Nervous Conditions* is written is but a tool to reveal the perversity of the colonial system. The unreliable narrator is able to «reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality» (Lodge: 155) and because of the extent of such a gap (made bigger and deeper through the constant understatements in the text) the fall into realisation of the reader is startling and even stunning. However, Dangarembga does not stop here. Not only through style does the novel create a gap into which we fall, but also through the events that she depicts. The analogous reaction to our realisation of reality when reading is what Bhabha defines as «mimicry» in colonial subjects. The characters in the novel experience a relatively similar «fall» into reality as we do as readers by being asked to play in one of the key «founding objects» (Bhabha: 92) of the Western world: marriage.

It could be argued that the novel's climax, the moment when Tambudzai stops being the passive and observant character in her own story and starts rebelling against the nonsensical coloni-

al machinery (taking as rebellion the mere fact of acknowledging its perversity), is when she refuses to attend the Christian wedding of her parents. «A wedding that made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world» (Dangarembga: 163). While what we have been reading up to this point is an account, almost nonchalant, of a sequence of outrageous experiences (Tambu's almost heroic struggle to go to school, her cousins' loss of their mother tongue, Maiguru's repressed freedom among other highlights of injustice), the wedding is a poignant turning point. She is punished for refusing to go through the «mockery» as she herself defines it, and such is the way that she concludes with the episode: «To me that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity» (Dangarembga: 169).

We have already seen how language plays a very important role in Dangarembga's narration, and the last two quotes, blunt, harsh, come as a surprise among the many understatements everywhere. The words «mockery» and «newly acquired identity» are fierce; as if, for an instant, we caught a glimpse of the real voice behind the sweet child. Their effect, because of the scarcity of such powerful terms, is highly remarkable: they double the impact of the performance of such a wedding. In fact, it is so blatant, such a «mockery», that the first that comes to mind is Homi K. Bhabha's statement in defining mimicry as being the core of colonial power, the well-known «not quite/ not white» (Bhabha: 92). Dangarembga's choice is masterly made: a wedding is the best and the most extreme case of mimicry. It is the very essence of the West which in the middle of Zimbabwe turns out to be nothing more than a pathetic *objet trouvé* (Bhabha: 92):

The whole performance was ridiculous. The whole business reduced my parents to the level of the stars of a comic show, the entertainers. (Dangarembga: 163)

The use of the word «performance» is what triggers the whole of Bhabha's theory of partial representation («by “partial” I mean both “incomplete” and “virtual”», Bhabha: 86). Benita Parry, in rephrasing Bhabha, states something very similar to the quotes that we have seen from *Nervous Conditions*:

When re-articulated by the native, the colonialist desire for a reformed, recognizable, nearly-similar other, is enacted as *parody*, a dramatization. ... The scenario written by colonialism is given a *performance* by the native that estranges and undermines the colonialist script. (Parry, 2003: 42) (my emphasis)

We will go back to the sense of parody and to performance after analysing to some extent what mimicry is in Bhabha's words and how it relates to the situation at hand. One of the best known statements of his «Of Mimicry and Men» is that «to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English» (Bhabha: 87), and it might be the best way to understand the constant dichotomies that appear in Bhabha's theory; having the colonial subjects performing as English-born white natives is emphatically not being English. «Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*» (Bhabha: 88) could be the explanation of this comment from Tambu: «And now the joke's over. You told me it wouldn't last» (Dangarembga: 168). What tried to be a truthful representation deformed itself to the extent that the repetition has become nothing but a joke; what is more, a joke that «wouldn't last».

The repetition of an event with the «desire to emerge as “authentic” ... is the final irony of partial representation» (Bhabha: 88). Performing as a White without taking into account the colour of one's own skin along with the differences of one's status in the colonial hierarchy is easily understood as a parody of the imperial system. A parody, however, explicitly demanded by the actual system. We cannot forget how colonialism erases the culture and the will of the colonized by imposing itself, usually language being the first step to whitewashing, as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o reminds us: «to control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others» (Ngugi: 390). For all of these reasons, when unable to describe oneself by one's own standards, mimicry comes in, offering the closest version to «imperial truth». This supposed *better way*, this «authorised version of otherness» (Bhabha: 88) is a way of appropriating «the Other as it visualizes power» (Bhabha: 86). It is extremely straightforward: in the novel, Tambu's parents are promised a better future because God, the white God, will finally bless them after they have lawfully married.

The theory assumes that their poverty and misfortune comes from being heathens, and black heathens for that matter; something which they cannot fully change. Fortunately for the colonial machinery, a Christian wedding will only turn the black heathens into black colonial subjects: no remarkable change. As Bhabha goes on to say, «the success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace» (Bhabha: 86). Anyone under colonial rule is an «inappropriate object»: *inappropriate* because they will never reach a respectable status in the metropolis' eye, and *object* because of that angry cry of Fanon, a «crushing objecthood» (Fanon: 109).

However, the most interesting part of this «strategic failure», which we could predict («not quite/ not white», Bhabha: 92), is this new dichotomy: «resemblance and menace». Tambu's reaction should be the best way to understand why partial representation is the way out of the suffocating effect of mimicry. The fact that a child, or anyone, should refuse mimicry and therefore be able to glimpse at the state in which she is subjected is when *menace* comes in. In other words and going back to Lodge, realising «the gap between appearance and reality» (Lodge: 105) is what makes Tambu, and any colonial subject, a menace to the system. As Ngugi reminds us when dealing with the loss of one's own mother tongue, «He was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself» (Ngugi: 17). We do not know whether this «he» in Ngugi, or «she» as in Tambu, actually realise to full extent the condition that they are in, their oppressed selves, but in any case they are beginning to be aware of the gap, and thus beginning their fall into conscience. They are, in a way, going down the path of awareness, as we previously described with Fanon's experience. We should name Lodge's «gap», though, with Bhabha's nomenclature: the «slippage», the «splitting».

We shall focus now on «the *splitting* of the colonial discourse» (Bhabha: 91), this place left for the «*ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, but *not quite*)» (Bhabha: 86) —the space of difference between the model and the parody, which is, in the end, where freedom can emerge.

Two attitudes towards external reality persist; one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates «reality» as mimicry. (Bhabha: 91).

As hinted at previously, the colonial subject, a partial object of the system (partial because it does not have a complete meaning or conscience inside the system, but she is a mere object, residual), cannot formulate in words what mimicry is. The discourse of the Empire, articulated so that it fully controls its subjects' «tools of self-definition in relationship to others» (Ngugi: 16), gags the oppressed. This does radically not mean that they are unable to be conscious of reality *as it is*. They definitely take «reality into consideration» (Bhabha: 91), even if their actions in the end only perpetuate and repeat the discourse of power. This awareness, then, as pointed out before, is, firstly, one of the reasons for mimicry's failure. Secondly, it is the reason for the subjects' sense of misplacement. Thirdly, it is their only ticket to freedom. But we cannot jump into sudden conclusions. Just as we readers do not quickly realise whether we are facing or not a number of understatements, and thus we cannot really grasp reality as it is, we might extend the parallel to the «inappropriate object» of mimicry. (This parallel, though, is only here suggested in abstract terms, without any intention to trivialise their suffering). When the idea of the wedding comes up, Tambu immediately feels wrong about it: we are not told why, instead, this is what she states:

I let guilt, so many razor-sharp edges of it, slice away at me. My mother had been right: I was unnatural ... there was something unnatural about me. (Dangarembga: 165)

This guilt which she cannot account for, cannot formulate or articulate, makes her think that she is unnatural —when we know it is right the opposite. Colonial discourse, however, cleverly poisons its subject into thinking that the slippage between reality and the white official version of life is their own unnaturality. Fanon pointed at this repeatedly when stating that the black man has only one destiny, being white, for this is his only available discourse; he cannot apparently escape it. The

way in which Tambu describes guilt, as numerous razors cutting her, resembles the definition that Bhabha makes of the split, and the ambivalence of mimicry in «Signs Taken for Wonders»:

The contour of difference is agonistic, shifting, splitting, ... occupies a position in space in space lying on the borderline between outside and inside. (Bhabha, 2003: 32)

This agony that he refers to is extremely relevant to understand why mimicry is *menace* to the very system. Even if wrongly formulated as «feeling unnatural», the refusal to comply completely with the discourse of power is the first step towards self-recognition and, thus, to some extent, the first step towards freedom (the moment which Lodge perceives as the growing perception of inadequacy (1992) that leads into final realisation of the truth).

This notion, however, might be deemed to be far too much optimistic for Bhabha reminds us that:

Splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles. (Bhabha, 2003: 34)

It cannot be denied that this felt unnaturality and the *slippage* is primarily, a side-effect of subjection, of «bastardness», of partiality – incompleteness and such. At the same time, though, we shall remind ourselves of Tambudzai's statement which is not elaborated upon, but which shines in this sea of shadows and misunderstood identities: «that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity» (Dangarembga: 169). We shall take this mention of a new identity as evidence that the writer is not far from the considerations that we have made about possible freedom, alongside of course with Fanon's own ideas: «there is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinary sterile and arid region ... from which a genuine new departure can emerge» (Fanon: 10). Just as in Dangarembga the punishment, the guilt and the feeling of unnaturality are the roots from which a new identity, authentic and original can emerge, Fanon states solemnly: «the fate of the neurotic lies in his own hands» (Fanon: 14).

Let us turn again to the main *objet trouvé* from Western origin in the novel: a big fat Christian wedding. The irony of mimicry in this case is doubled or tripled by the very simple fact that a wedding, the ritual of marriage is, in itself, a dramatization of the union of men and God. Without getting into much detail, it is a well-known fact that every stage of the wedding has a meaning towards God: how the father gives away the bride, how the hands of the bride and the groom are bonded, the vows. It is the biggest and most remarkable show of Westernness. A Christian wedding is, then, a simple summary of what the White man is in the world. A summary executed as a show.

Marriage: Symbol of the loving union between the man and the woman. In a mystique sense, it means the union between Christ and his Church, between God and his People, and between the Soul and its God. (Chevalier, J. and Gheerbrant, A., 1992: 611<sup>5</sup>)

However, we shall not look into the actual, grandiloquent ritual of the Western marriage because we are not discussing a Western marriage. We are trying to deal with a dramatization of the discourse of power as enacted by its subjects. Benita Parry uses a very interesting phrase to describe mimicry which does fit the situation we have been describing: «rearticulating in broken English» (Parry, 2003: 43). This brokenness of language can be an interesting description of the slippage between the actual marriage and its meaning, and how it ends up being an entertainment show. Going back to Bhabha, when he asserts that the founding objects become «erratic» and «accidental», we need to understand now to which extent this wedding is based on absurd assumptions and thus to realise how much the difference is between what a wedding means and what *Nervous Conditions* renders it. Tambu recognises, before the event, that she is afraid:

Afraid too that she [Lucia] would start sleeping with my father again and increase our portion of sin so much that it would take more than a wedding to exorcise it. (Dangarembga: 153).

---

<sup>5</sup> «Mariage: Symbole de l'union amoureuse de l'homme et de la femme. Dans un sens mystique, il signifie l'union du Christ avec son Église, de Dieu avec son Peuple, de l'âme avec son Dieu.»



The need for a wedding answers to a belief (a clearly «pagan» belief, using the coloniser's lexicon) that the misfortune of a whole Shona family can and will be exorcised through some ritual. This obviously does not point to Christian beliefs at all. But if we look deeper into the matter, the apparent misfortune is the existence of a woman that sleeps with Tambu's father (assuming that he is a victim of her, of Lucia, «the whore and the witch», Dangarembga: 126). Let us take everything we have seen into account from the same perspective: firstly, the performance of a Christian wedding is a dramatization of the union of the white man with His God. This dramatization is doubled by the fact that its actors are mimicking white weddings: the parody. Nevertheless, this is not all. The reasons for this «double drama» as we may call it are essentially sexist. A marriage is needed to wash the harm that a woman might have done to the family by sleeping with Tambu's father. Nobody even wonders whether the father had anything to do in it (nobody *seems* to wonder, but let us not forget how everyone does see reality as it is to a certain extent). Even in the context of whitewashed, oppressed, silenced subjects, men always rule. Disguised behind apparent native beliefs, it is the voice of patriarchy who is executing all parodies. The fact that Babamukuru arranges and pays for the wedding makes him the orchestrator, the stage director, increasing thus the number of layers of parody.

We shall look into this «increase our portion of sin» now, and how sin, Christian sin, for the characters of the novel, is a wrong cultural translation. Tambu's assumption that a ritual might exorcise what she calls «sin», puts into question the whole understanding of Christianity that she has. It is yet another proof of the strategic failure of mimicry: a Shona family will not and cannot be completely whitewashed. Their animistic beliefs will always undermine the «founding objects» of the West (in this case, the West's imposed religion). Bhabha lists some of the «consequences of mimicry»: «guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities and classifications» (Bhabha: 91). It is remarkable how the whole wedding is wrapped in superstition in *Nervous Conditions*, and we are spectators of how crooked the sham is. Dangarembga cleverly

points, through Tambu, at the inconsistencies of mimicry: «[Sin] It had to be avoided because it was deadly. I could see it. It was definitely black, we were taught.» (Dangarembga: 150) The black and white dichotomies are not new to us, but they are rendered almost comically in this last quote and in the following, which expands in the meaning of colours ironically: «The holy whites lighten our darkness.» (Dangarembga: 103) We will not go back again to underline the immense power of understatement, as in «I could see it. It was definitely black», or «our darkness». The simplicity of language revolts the reader and, consequently, it achieves its wanted purpose. And yet regarding their relevance to the wedding and «sin», and cultural translation, it is even graphically interesting how in the eyes of the child blackness («definitely black») can be increased in some way so that the holy whites with their rituals shall have to exorcise misfortune, and bring the light. The perversity of the colonial machinery and acculturation shows its workings. It is at this point that Tambu's exclamation, «a cleansing or a wedding?» (Dangarembga: 148), can be fully understood. We are as a matter of fact facing a traditional ritual of the Shona's.

In sum, we are seeing now another dramatization emerging, or being performed. We pointed out how a wedding was a show already in the West, how it became a parody of the show in the colonies, how the reason for this parody was essentially patriarchy, and now, eventually, a new layer comes in: the wedding is being taken in «broken English» (Parry: 43) as an animistic ritual to exorcise misfortune. In the end, the menace for mimicry, the native culture, always surfaces.

The visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction ... a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed. (Bhabha, 1994: 89)

Sometimes, though, what must be kept concealed becomes glaring and blatant, infuriating, just as in Fanon. And Dangarembga, somehow deciding not to restrain her consistently understating style, lets out a sentence such as the following, that sums up perfectly what we have been discussing, alongside with Fanonian nausea:

My mother immaculate in virginal white satin ... I suffered a horrible crawling over my skin.

(Dangarembga: 149)

The word «virginal» is immensely powerful. It brings back all the crookedness of the West being thrown into a community that does not even have such patterns in their culture; what is more, a community which does not have this colour, white. Tambu's visceral reaction is what we, readers, feel when the «gap» strikes us.

To conclude, it can be affirmed that the wedding in *Nervous Conditions* is, for the main character, a turning point in her relationship to the system that subjects her, because she assumes a new identity in rebelling against it (regardless of her inability to formulate the reason of her disgust). Furthermore, it can be stated as well that the trigger of change in her, this wedding, cannot be any more powerful. It is the extreme of ridicule and mimicry as defined by Bhabha. Parody and dramatization as well as the performance of foreign rituals become a mixture of superstition, repressed identity, patriarchy and resignation.

### 3. Conclusion: Have a Good Time, you African.

Easy! As if it ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. (Dangarembga: 16).

But it's not that simple, you know, it really isn't. It's not really him, you know. I mean not really the person. It's everything, it's everywhere. So where do you break out to? You're just one person and it's everywhere. (Dangarembga: 174)

*Nervous Conditions* succeeds in generating in the reader a nervous condition: it could not be otherwise. What had begun as an innocent-looking tale of an almost agreeable Rhodesia builds up into a solemn cry of impotence in the face of the colonial system and patriarchy. These two quotations are the voices of two of the main characters in the story. The first one is Tambu's mother, and the second one is Nyasha. Our intention will be to provide conclusions from the already made statement that there is nothing but resignation for the subjected individual regardless of her realisation of the state she finds herself in (the «fall»). Through these two characters' attitudes we will go back to the narrator and the author's intention in writing the novel.

Tambu's mother embodies what we know as the subaltern, as defined extensively by Spivak in «Can the Subaltern Speak» (2003). She is at the very end of the hierarchy and she is fully conscious of it: «if ... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even

more deeply in the shadow» (Spivak, 2003: 28). However, she does speak in the novel. Her passivity is not at odds with her awareness of her condition, quite the opposite. By defining womanhood and poverty as the main reasons for her misfortune (Dangarembga: 17) she articulates the nature of her fate. She accepts «virginal white satin» on her (Dangarembga: 149) but is able to explain why: «Does it matter what I want? ... what I have endured for nineteen years I can endure for another nineteen» (Dangarembga: 153).

The antithesis to the passivity and compliance to mimicry of the mother is Nyasha, distinctly different. Much earlier than Tambu, Nyasha became aware of the perversity of the colonisers' rule. Hers is the devastating exclamation, at the very end of the novel, addressed to Tambu: «Have a good time, you African» (Dangarembga: 195), highlighting the absurdity of the nonsensical term «African». The notion of Africa is an invented label just as suffocating as all the «authorised versions of otherness» (Bhabha, 1994: 88) that we have been seeing. She is extremely aware of her condition of «African» in the eyes of the colonizer, and thus her resignation is of a different kind: her refusal of colonization, which she calls by its name («It's bad enough ... when a country gets colonised, but when people do as well! That's the end», Dangarembga: 147), makes her stop eating. She physically renounces the system, she will not swallow the poisonous pill. Hers is, by far, the most traumatising nervous condition in the novel. Her strength in going against the system makes her weak, and vulnerable. Hers is, in a way, another kind of resignation.

These two women, with almost opposite attitudes towards the system but nonetheless equal victims of it, are the key to understanding why the power of Dangarembga's novel does not only reside in an extremely clever use of stylistic devices and topics. It is relevant to our conclusions to point out how outspoken the women's voices are in the novel: they are quoted, never paraphrased in the style which we have discussed at length. On one side, we find understatement and the will to depict blatant cases of mimicry and submission. On the other side, we find speeches which are word for word, without clarifications nor comments on them; only voices. This last point again tells us

something about the attitude of the narrator or of the author towards the reader: we are left to our own devices, and yet we are led repeatedly into realisation. This «fall» into realisation is given by the unreliability of the narrator, the choice of topics and the decision to give voice to the marginalised. It couldn't be more elegant: Tambu's understatements are unsettling and suspicious, the events of the book are glaringly disturbing because of the extreme dose of subjection that they display (they are then perfect examples of Bhabha's mimicry). Finally, the ones who are usually silenced get to have their say without being patronised in any way —their speeches are reproduced literally. This last point frames the contents of this paper: Dangarembga in her narration has chosen non-conventional strategies to deliver something very unlike our expectations of a text that undermines the very foundations of colonialism. In line with Linda Hutcheon's quote when stating that feminism and post-colonialist texts use postmodern tropes not for luxury but because they need them to avenge the many offenses suffered, Dangarembga fights for the two: she is highly political. Hers is a novel that does not press the issues as a list of offenses, or a political manifesto; it is much more clever than that. Her move is to give an answer to the most well-known theories regarding post-colonialism without having to spell them out to us. It will be *us* phrasing them and articulating them in our minds when reading through «the story of four women whom I loved, and our men.» (Dangarembga: 204) It would be a mistake, though, to understand her work as an elegant rephrasing of the concepts and experiences that postcolonialism deals with: she acknowledges Fanon, but does not share his vocal anger; she acknowledges Bhabha's mimicry but portrays many reactions against and in favour of it; she acknowledges Spivak and her discourse on women and the subaltern, and yet she gives voice to subaltern women. There is even another feature of the novel which needs to be pointed out: despite resignation in a myriad of forms and characters, the mere account of Tambu's life is a cry of hope (as Broughton asserts, quoted by Moyana, 1994: 23). The narrator's ambiguous attitude is only meant for us to really grasp reality, and not there to suggest that Tambu is but another colonial subject. In sum, the simplicity with which all the complex issues in the novel

are treated needs to be immensely praised. Anger and need of revenge are there: sharp, poignant. Happiness is also there: simple, natural. Friendship, hope. Overall, though, there is only one theme impregnating the story: conscience. The constant awareness of reality and truth is the main protagonist of the novel. We are made to realise just as all the characters do: to be made conscious of one's own self.

Don't forget, don't forget, don't forget. Nyasha, my mother, my friends. Always the same message. But why? If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that, of course, could not happen. (Dangarembga: 188)

We, as Tambu, shall not forget her, or her story. It would be, as well, to forget ourselves.

## Bibliography

Primary source:

DANGAREMBGA, T. *Nervous Conditions*, London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1998.

Secondary Sources:

BAHARVAND, P. A. and ZARRINJOEE, B. «The formation of hybrid identity in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*», *African Journal of History and Culture* Vol. 4(3), 2012: 27-36.

BORG BARTHET, S. «Enduring narratives in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*». In Constant, I. Mabanad, K. C. (Eds.). *Negritude*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 181-196.

BHABHA, H. K. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

BHABHA, H. K. «Signs taken for wonders». In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.). New York: Routledge, 1995, 29-35.

CHEVALIER, J. AND GHEERBRANT, A., *Dictionnaire des Symboles*, Paris: Robert Laffont / Jupiter, 1992.

CONRAD, J. *Heart of Darkness*, Boston: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1996.

FANON, F. *Black Skins, White Masks* (trans. Lam Markmann, C). Helsinki: Pluto Press, 1986.

HODGE, B. AND MISHRA, V. «What is Post (-) Colonialism?». In *Textual Practice*, 5, 3, 1991, 399-414.

KIM, S. J. *On Anger: Race, Cognition, Narrative*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013.

LESSING, D. *African Laughter*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

LODGE, D. *The Art of Fiction*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1992.



- MOYANA, R. «Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions: An Attempt in the Feminist Tradition» in *Zambezia* (1994), XXI (I), 23-42, University of Michigan.
- NGUGI WA THIONG'O, *Decolonising the Mind*, Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1994.
- PARRY, B. «Current Theories of Colonial Discourse». In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.). New York: Routledge, 1995, 36-44.
- SPIVAK, G. C. «Can the Subaltern Speak?». In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.). New York: Routledge, 1995, 24-28.
- SUGNET, C. «Dangarembga's feminist reinvention of Fanon». In Nnaemeka O. (ed). *The Politics of (M) Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 35-44.
- VIZZARD, M. «Of Mimicry and Woman: Hysteria and AntiColonial Feminism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions». *Span: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Culture Literature and Language Studies*, Number 36, 1992: 202-210.

Further readings:

- GRAY, R. «Unnatural Daughters: Postmodernism and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*». *The European Legacy*, Vol. 2, Iss. 1, 1997: 115-120.
- HAY, S. «*Nervous Conditions*, Lukacs, and the Postcolonial Bildungsroman». *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 46(3), 2013: 317-334.